

UNCLAS HALIFAX 000168

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SUBJECT: RUNWAY CONSTRUCTION LEAVES HALIFAX AIRPORT IN THE FOG

¶1. Summary: A series of foggy days in July caused the cancellation or diversion of hundreds of flights to and from Halifax International Airport and stranded thousands of passengers, sullying the airport's once-sterling reputation for customer service. In response, the Halifax International Airport Authority (HIAA) recently held meetings with stakeholders to explain the causes of the delays which include work on the runways and Instrument Landing System (ILS). With the airport undergoing a four-year expansion and upgrade program the worst may be yet to come for travelers. End Summary.

¶2. Halifax International Airport is in the process of major runway construction as part of a four year, C\$40 million expansion program. The airport welcomes more than three million passengers each year. In the 2004 annual survey done by the International Air Transport Association and co-sponsored by the airports council, HIA landed three top-place finishes in the customer satisfaction survey and third in best improvement of overall satisfaction. However, as a result of poor weather conditions (dense fog) and an inoperable ILS, the airport has slipped in public confidence due to the significant disruption to flights. To try to control the damage, HIAA has been more proactive in alerting travelers to potential delays and has arranged meetings with the airlines, regulators, associated agencies and community leaders to brief them and receive feedback.

¶3. At the beginning of May, HIAA embarked on a major five-month airfield reconstruction program that it says is vital to the integrity and operation of the airport, allowing the airport to continue to meet regulatory standards and to ensure the safety of passengers, crew, and staff. The reconstruction involves extensive improvements to the airport's electrical and paving work, including in-pavement and side-pavement lights. This construction affected the airport's ILS. HIAA noted that contrary to press claims, there are no portable ILS or other alternative precision approach navigation aids that meet regulatory standards available -- military ILS is not certified in Canada for civilian aviation use.

¶4. HIAA, although sympathetic to its passengers, said that there had been no way to avoid a project of this nature and length without including the month of July, even though July and August are two of the busiest tourism months for Nova Scotia. Before beginning the project, a survey of weather conditions, prevailing winds, temperature, and runway usage was conducted and HIAA had consulted with Transport Canada for recommendations of the best timeline for the project. Unfortunately, unusually dense fog during the month of July has caused many, and at times all, flights to be diverted to Moncton or cancelled.

¶5. HIAA argued that before commencing the project, it met with many of the major players potentially impacted by the construction of the runways, including media, airlines, and travel agents. While HIAA expressed sympathy for the public and agreed that it should take responsibility for the impact the delay has had on passengers and airlines, it also stated that accountability must also come from the airlines, media, and travel agents. HIAA has now put in a communications plan to publish daily travel/weather advisories on its website, which also contains information on the reconstruction of the airport along with frequently asked questions about the reconstruction program. Further, HIAA will meet regularly with the airlines and work with them in putting together a contingency plan for any future diverted flights due to inclement weather. HIAA also plans to meet with Transport Canada and NavCanada with respect to the remaining phases of the construction, to examine any options for more flexibility in the system to allow them to respond to potential weather impacts. One of the two runways reopened July 14, 2005, temporarily shortened in length, but with a fully operational navigational system in service. HIAA expressed optimism that operations would be back to normal by early October. HIAA reinforced that there number one priority is the safety of passengers.

¶6. Comment: While the consensus of the attendees at the HIAA briefing was that more should have been done to make the public aware of the reconstruction of the runways and the potential effect it could have on travelers, there was no way that HIAA could have anticipated the severity of the weather. The question of who had the responsibility for advising airline travelers of the possible disruption of flights was left unanswered. In the end, attendees from the travel industry, airlines, and government offices all agreed that the runway reconstruction was much needed.

